



CELEBRATING AMERICA

No protesters at Rushmore Trump event

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South Dakota Searchlight

KEYSTONE — Six years after authorities arrested demonstrators blocking a road leading to a fireworks display featuring President Donald Trump at Mount Rushmore, the same area stood empty as he returned.

The National Park Service reserved a 100-foot-long zone for First Amendment activities Friday along the highway leading out of the town of Keystone and toward the mountain carving in western South Dakota's Black Hills.

By the late afternoon, nobody had showed up to protest amid a military and law enforcement presence that was keeping an eye on the area. Trump was scheduled to speak later in the evening before the fireworks.

Nick Tilsen, CEO of the Rapid City-based Indigenous advocacy group NDN Collective, led the 2020 protest and was one of the people arrested that year following a physical clash with law enforcement. Charges were later dropped.

Several months ago, Tilsen told South Dakota Searchlight "my guess is that Lakota people all across the homelands from this area won't sit on the sidelines" of this year's fireworks show. Lakota tribes formerly controlled the Black Hills under treaties violated by the federal government, and the tribes still assert those treaty rights. There are also numerous sites of Lakota spiritual significance in the Black Hills.

In recent days, Tilsen told Searchlight that NDN Collective was "boycotting" this year's Trump visit.

"Quite frankly, we don't need to feed into his narrative," Tilsen said.

He cited a desire to focus on community organizing, which he said has produced numerous wins since 2020. He pointed to a jury trial victory in a lawsuit against owners of a Rapid City hotel who were accused of discriminating against Native American guests, a company's withdrawal from an exploratory graphite drilling project in a Black Hills meadow used for spiritual ceremonies, and a 20-year-ban on mining activity in the Black Hills' Rapid Creek watershed.

Tilsen is separately helping to launch the Day One Movement, which is described as "the beginning of a new future" on Sunday, the day after the nation's 250th birthday. The movement includes advocacy for returning lands taken from Native Americans and providing reparations to African American people for slavery, among other goals.

Another local group, Indivisible Rapid City, which has been involved in past anti-Trump protests, issued a statement later Friday saying it had chosen "to follow the lead of local Indigenous leaders" by not demonstrating against the president during observances of the nation's founding anniversary.

"We have no interest in centering him or any one political figure in a celebration that belongs to all who call this place home," the group's statement said, in part.

With no protesters along the highway Friday, people clothed in red, white and blue trickled into and through Keystone to celebrate Trump and the nation's 250th birthday.

Rob Wills of Rapid City said he was "looking forward to seeing something that hasn't taken place in the last six years over a beautiful monument."

Lynda Boepple and her husband traveled from Whitefish, Montana. A relative came from Northern California to join them.

"We love President Trump," Boepple said.

They had unsuccessfully entered the online lottery for the 4,800 tickets awarded to view the fireworks show from the Mount Rushmore amphitheater. They planned to watch from Keystone, about 2 miles below Mount Rushmore, and hoped to find a livestream of Trump's speech.

"The 250th is just a wonderful celebration of our amazing country and the freedoms that are afforded to us," Boepple said.

Boepple and her husband were also in Keystone during the 2020 event. She recalled seeing a convoy of law enforcement vehicles travel toward the protesters' blockade and protesters being transported back through town.

"There was stuff going on up there, but overall, the vibe of love of country and patriotism overshadowed all of that," she said.



MIKE BROWNLEE, JOURNAL STAFF

They call it the biggest Independence Day parade in the Black Hills. Belle Fourche hosted its annual celebration through town on Saturday, July 4.

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